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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

A Secret Revealed

Tanya M. Zbitnew
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Bounders and Easterling warriors have begun to stalk the Northlands. Ranger cadet Camber Bloodstone his cousin Dane and Captain Dega Darkhawk discover the reason when the earth opens and spills them into a dwarf warren. Sentash the Easterling king is a powerful sorcerer who has sensed Camber's emergent magical powers. He is also searching for a magic item the Winterstone (last seen among the Elves) that may allow him to conquer their homeland and the western and southern kingdoms besides. Accompanied by a dwarven prince who is also an apprentice wizard a warlike wood elf and (after a visit to Illianther) a number of other elven warriors the party sets out to find the Winterstone and ultimately Camber's destiny.

A particularly amusing moment early on effectively amounts to a critique of Gandalf and similar figures; something that's interesting about Zbitnew's leading wizard Stornoway Hawker is his fallibility. Half the time he's onscreen he reads as clumsy and not entirely reliable:

> *'So why can't you just get rid of the Easterling King on your own?' Dane asked. Camber was thinking the same thing. But the wizard was probably one of those high-minded types who made everyone else do the dirty work so that they might all learn some kind of valuable lesson…'To extinguish the gift of Life would go against everything that is my very essence'…'But you have no problem using others to extinguish life' said Dega…'Yes but that's different' answered Hawker.*

To her credit Zbitnew never entirely resolves this puzzle and it is pleasant to see fantasy inquiring into its own metanarrative structure.

A number of plot elements and some of her characters are Tolkien derivatives but Zbitnew still manages to make her novel unique; a few of the strongest examples are the tale of Sharp-Glance and Feather Karpung (a dwarven game) the cadets' training with the rangers some of Stornoway Hawker's foibles and flaws and best of all her creation (or perhaps inclusion) of the dwarxen. Female dwarven characters are rare (except in the work of Terry Pratchett) and Zbitnew's creative explanation for why they are kept out of sight is inspired; it's also satisfying to see them defying their subjugation by the end of the novel. One weak spot is the jungti generic barbarians (or perhaps orcs or ogres) who attack the party with poison arrows and are described as having "the look of men but the mindset of animals"; Zbitnew veers dangerously into H. Rider Haggard territory for the brief time they're onscreen.

Her treatment of the two romances she works in is unfortunately fairly conventional with spunky tomboyish even warlike women sparring stereotypically with their future mates and then settling happily down to have babies by the story's end. Nonetheless she manages to inject a sizeable amount of chemistry into her handling of Starlock's love story which spans most of the novel and kept this reviewer reading through slow moments in the plot. The book as a whole (in terms of content and reading level) seems appropriate for either adult or older YA readers. Although it doesn't possess great philosophical depth *A Secret Revealed* is certainly entertaining.
VAL GRIMM (March 25, 2008)

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